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Important research is being left behind – here's how a change to the funding system could help

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Cambridge is among the top performers in the REF 2014. Chris Radburn/PA Wire

Author



Peter Strike

Vice Chancellor , University of Cumbria

With Christmas not far off, universities will be hoping for some early presents in the form of good results in the UK's long-awaited assessment of the quality of university research. Although the funding formula upon which university research is based won't be published until the new year, in many ways universities already know the financial outcomes of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) results – because the status quo is unlikely to shift.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) will allocate its research funding depending on quality research rated as four-star or three-star in the REF exercise. Four-star is awarded to research deemed to be “world-leading” and three-star to be “internationally-excellent”.

The great majority of the £2bn a year of research funding is likely to continue to go to the top six institutions as identified recently by HEFCE: Cambridge, Imperial, King's College London, UCL, Manchester and Oxford. Most of what remains will go to the next 20 institutions and the scraps will be divided among the remaining 100 or so.

It is unlikely that any of the post-1992 universities that grew out of old polytechnics, or have developed since, will receive more than 10% of their HEFCE-related income (including fees) through funding linked to research rated as four-star or three-star.

Compare this to the funding received by the top six institutions based on four-star and three-star rated research, where research funding may make up more than 60% of HEFCE income (including

student fees). These allocations, of course, are a reflection of the quality and volume of research to be found in our research-led universities – they are genuinely excellent in what they do, and we would all wish their success to continue.

Regional research left out

What the allocations don't do is to recognise the value of the applied and relevant research that is so important to local and regional economies and supports the growth aspirations of small and medium-sized businesses. Nor do they properly reward smaller research units in the newer institutions which are consistently marked down on the "research environment" criteria in the REF – which assesses research strategy, staff development and the training of postgraduates – despite the acknowledged excellence of their outputs.

Much of this research is very cost-effective, achieved without great expenditure on infrastructure and resources, and yet its effects are deeply felt. Much of it is of national importance – it is the two-star quality work that makes up the majority output of most universities and which was so damagingly dismissed by business secretary Vince Cable as "mediocre" in 2010. It isn't mediocre, it just isn't world leading – I'm afraid we can't all be leaders on the world stage all of the time. Most research from early career researchers is likely to fall into this category, and we would all surely accept that research careers have to be developed.

Should all universities do research?

We could ask why research aspirations continue to burn brightly in all institutions that call themselves universities. This would be a very British, actually a very English, question. Higher education establishments across Europe and the Commonwealth (including Scotland) recognise the value of research, and have expectations around research performance built into their structures. There is no obligation on English universities to have research degree awarding powers. This is not true in Scotland.

Sweden, like the UK, converted their polytechnics into universities in 1992. It was understood that a proper balance between research and teaching in these new universities would be 20% research, 80% taught, and they were funded to allow this to happen. In England, full funding for the development of a research base in new universities has not been provided since the 1960s.

Yet research aspirations are likely to be present in the hearts and minds of most academics, no matter what type of institution they work in. Many of the applied and vocational programmes in which the new universities specialise (for example the NHS-funded programmes) are quite specific that the programmes should be research-informed and delivered in a research-active environment.

Skewed allocations



Cable's label of 'mediocrity' has been hard to swallow. Danny Lawson/PA Wire

One answer to the dilemma of how to meet these aspirations would simply to be more fair in the formulaic allocation of funds. The last time university research was assessed in the Research Assessment Exercise 2008, the top research-intensive universities were assessed as having 62% of research at three-star or four-star level but were in receipt of 68% of funding council support. Modern universities were assessed as having 9% of research at three-star and four-star level in 2012, but received only 0.07% of funding council funds.

These skewed allocations have a serious impact on the student experience in the modern university sector – and it should be remembered that these are the majority of students in the UK. The allocations also undermine the ability of new and regional institutions to undertake applied and “useful” research.

Towards fairer funding

A key example is in the partnerships between business and universities. The government’s Innovate UK supports Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) in which research associates are placed with companies to tackle real-world issues while studying for a higher degree. Institutional support for KTPs requires the engagement of research-active academic staff, which is difficult to do without support from quality-related research funding from HEFCE.

And yet we manage it. In my own institution, the University of Cumbria, we have never had a KTP project graded less than “good”, with a number of “outstanding” grades. We recruit excellent associates, and our academic staff are highly qualified, often with PhDs from research-intensive universities. So, of course the results are good, and being good they add to the sense of frustration that we cannot do more.

The answer surely is to ensure that all universities receive an appropriate baseline allocation of research funds, either by formula or by restoring funding for those universities that get two-star ratings in the REF, which was taken away after 2008. Applied and translational research needs and deserves more effective support from Innovate UK, perhaps by an assessment of impact that is freed from the constraint of the REF grades.

For more on the 2014 REF, including other views and an assessment of “impact”, [click here](#).

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